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THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

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CHAPTER I.

THE FATHER AND THE LOVER OF AN AMERICAN GIRL.

THE great Transiberian railway had progressed as far to the eastward as the Obi, and trains carrying soldiers, convicts, sightseers, railway constructors, laborers and supplies, with some goods for trade with Manchuria, ran from Moscow.

The possibilities of this immense line of railway made the people of European Russia gasp. It opened up such a prospect of trade as they had never dreamed of. It gave them a speedy entrance into a region of their domain the crossing of which had formerly occupied months and involved much hardship.

"What a change there was from the old sledges or foot trains of convicts to the swiftly moving cars that were drawn by the puffing, screaming locomotives, at once a source of delight and terror to the people whose territory they crossed!

Among those who had made this change so remarkable a success was James Gordon, an American engineer, who had charge of much of the advance work of the road.

Gordon was a typical American, ready to go anywhere to build a railway so long as the pay was sufficient to make it an object for him to take his daughter with him.

For Frances Gordon was her father's companion, secretary and comfort.

Left motherless at an early age, she had been brought up by strict aunts till she revolted. Her father had been surveying a route across New Mexico for a new road, fondly and longingly thinking of his daughter in her far-away home in New York, when, lo, the young lady herself, then aged nineteen, put in an appearance mounted on a broncho and accompanied by a half breed guide, to whom she spoke in so authoritative a tone that he bowed before her slightest wish in abject obedience. Since that day Frances Gordon was to be found wherever her father was.

A year and a half after they had finished the work in Mexico they journeyed together to Russia, where Gordon was to take charge of the important part of putting through the railway that was destined to revolutionize the trade and commerce of the world.

This great railway had progressed as far as the Obi river, in the government of Tomsk, Siberia, when a meeting of managers, engineers and government officials was ordered at Moscow. Thither from the Obi journeyed James Gordon and Frances.

Thither also journeyed Nicholas Neslerov, prince of the empire and governor of the province of Tomsk.

Prince Neslerov was one of the wealthiest nobles of the land, was about thirty-five years of age and had, besides his exalted position as governor of Tomsk, estates in various parts of Russia, particularly a fine one at Graslov, in the government of Perm.

It was after the convention, which had to do with certain concessions and arrangements that were necessary as the road drew near the border of Manchuria, the crossing of certain streams, that Mr. Gordon was preparing to return to the Obi, where the western end of his operations was laid, the operations themselves reaching eastward to Lake Balkal in Irkutsk.

To him one day as he sat smoking at his hotel in Moscow came Prince Neslerov.

"Good morning, your excellency," said Gordon, who had met the prince at several conferences and now knew him because of the fact that the operations had passed almost across his province. "Glad to see you. When do you return to Tomsk?"

"I shall not be long behind you, my friend," replied the prince. "It is a fact, however, that upon your answer to a certain question which I shall put to you depends many of my acts in the immediate future. M. Gordon, you are an American."

"So I believe; I have heard it hinted at," said Mr. Gordon, wondering what was coming.

"And I am a Russian of the Russians."

"That, too, I believe, is a well authenticated fact."

"I am wealthy, a governor of a province and shall soon be promoted to a better station. Since you entered the rude territory in the southern part of my government we have met frequently; we have been friends."

"Yes," replied Gordon, rather dubiously stroking his chin.

"When you needed protection, my power protected you."

"I believe you," said Gordon, failing to remember the time when he needed

the protection of the prince.

"I merely express myself thus to recall to you my friendship," said the prince. "Now I come to the real errand that brought me here. I love your daughter."

"Eh?" exclaimed Gordon, rousing himself an offending perceptibly.

"I repeat, I love your daughter. I want her for my wife, my princess."

A cloud of smoke came from Gordon's lips. He was looking at a distant church tower with eyes that saw no church.

"You seem surprised," said the prince. "Is it a matter of surprise that a man should love so noble and beautiful a young woman as your daughter?"

"No," said Gordon slowly, "and if it were I would be used to it by this time. You are not the first."

A slight pallor appeared on the cheeks of Neslerov.

"You do not mean that she—your daughter Frances—is already promised?"

"No," answered Gordon. "I don't know that she is, but I do know that you are not the first who has asked for her. Even now you may be too late."

"Impossible! I have seen no one of my—of her own—station near her."

"We in America," said Gordon, "look upon this question of station or rank with different eyes than you do. If a man suited Frances, all the rank, titles and wealth in the world would make no difference."

"She is different from girls in Europe," said the prince, biting his lip.

Gordon let out a joyous guffaw.

"I should say she was!" he said. "Different! Why, she is a real, whole, healthy woman. She doesn't smoke



"I love your daughter."

cigarettes, gamble at cards and race after titles and wealth. Not my girl, prince. Frances has a healthy mind and is as noble as she is good looking. But she has a mind of her own, if it is healthy, and—well, she is my boss, I can tell you!"

"You charm me. I am more in love than ever."

"Won't do a bit of good, I tell you. If I thought you were the finest man on earth, my wishes would not prevail upon Frances to marry you. She will make her own choice, when it is made, and it will stand."

"You lead me to believe this choice has already been made."

"No, I did not mean that, prince. It might be so, for all I know to the contrary. Frances might love a man and not yet be ready to tell me, although there is nothing secretive about her. We have each other's confidence."

"Still it could not be possible that she would be in love and you not know it."

"It might, and I will tell you why. She has refused to marry the man I chose for her, the finest young man, in my estimation, on earth."

"Then you have already given your allegiance to a lover."

"I gave it to the lover, but Frances would not marry him. I have no objection to your knowing who it is. It is Denton, the bridge builder. Jack Denton was the son of one of my oldest friends. Old Denton was at one time worth a lot of money, but lost it through the rascality of a man he trusted. Jack was a sort of genius and asked me what profession to take up. I told him bridge engineering. He is one of the best at the business now and is only twenty-five. He is out near the Obi. The big iron bridge we are to put across the Obi will be his work."

"It is a fascinating profession, your daughter refused him?"

"Yes, and it was a great disappointment to me. Jack and she have been friends since they first went to school. He loves her, and his love is the kind that a father likes to see his girl get. But she won't have him for some reason."

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